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AUTHOR Epes, Mary; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Many students, especially nontraditional ones, are not ready for conventional instruction in composition because their problems with the medium overwhelm the content of their writing. There are two different needs for composition students: composing (content) and editing (correctness), which need to be taught in a two-step process. Composing can be taught in a traditional classroom setting, while editing can be developed in a self-teaching laboratory. Three assumptions underlie one program that uses this process: error is not trivial, error can be explained, and what can be explained can be taught. Some reasons error occurs include interference between nonstandard speech and the grammar of standard written English, ignorance of scribal conventions, and difficulties in mastering complex written syntax uncommon to spoken English and inflectional endings not reflected in some students' speech patterns. Error correction can best occur through practice in using standard grammatical forms. This can increase students' fluency and rhetorical development and improve their attitudes toward writing. (TJ)

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Mary Epes
Carolyn Kirkpatrick
Michael Southwell
Department of English
York College
Jamaica, NY 11451
(212) 969-4077

Investigating Error in the Writing of Nontraditional College Students

Our curriculum research has been supported by a two-year grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, under which we have developed a model basic writing course. The needs of students in our course can be illustrated by this, the first paper written by one student for English 100:

[Figure A]

What immediately strikes the eye in a paper like this is the large number of word-form mistakes and signs of literal, physical difficulty in putting words down on paper. A student who writes like this is not ready for conventional instruction in composition--for example, in argumentative strategies--because her problems with the medium overwhelm her content. And this is true whether the content is rather sophisticated (as in fact it is here) or is weak (as is much more likely).

In developing the model course, we've had to grapple with these two very different needs: composing (or instruction in content) and editing (or instruction in correctness--that is, in the grammar of standard written English). Our solution has been to differentiate carefully between the two, giving them equal emphasis, but teaching them in entirely different ways, and in entirely different settings. For a student at this level, writing papers must be a two-step process: the student first

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composes a paper, and only then edits it for correctness. Otherwise, the two processes tend to derail one another.

The first of these skills, composing, we teach in a traditional classroom setting; the second, editing, is developed in an autotutorial laboratory. We have found that instruction in both these areas--composing and editing--is most successful when they are driven apart like this. While we do spend a great deal of time in the course on the composing process, most of our research has been on students' problems with the basic forms of standard written English.

Behind our work, and that of others in this area, lie some very basic assumptions, most persuasively formulated by Mina Shaughnessy in Errors and Expectations: The first is that error is not trivial. The second is that error can be explained. The third is that what can be explained, can be taught.

First, error is not trivial. Some say one shouldn't concern oneself with error in writing, that it doesn't really impede communication, or that the language is in a state of flux. Others (though these days fewer and fewer) would argue that attention to error is harmful to students, because work on correctness stultifies their minds or damages their sense of self-worth. But the simple truth is this: a student who writes papers like the one we just showed will fail--and not only in school. As this paper shows, errors in writing do impede communication--and most damaging of all to a sense of self-worth is the knowledge that one has not mastered the dominant medium of public life in one's culture.

Second, error can be explained. Why do college students, after twelve years of schooling, still have such massive and pervasive problems with correctness in writing? The main reason is an obvious one: interference between nonstandard speech and the grammar of standard written English. This explanation has persuasive face validity; however, so far, the body of research to back it up is fairly limited. Still, the experience of most basic writing teachers confirms it: students who are placed into English 100 at York (and equivalent courses elsewhere) seldom speak standard English. They may speak a nonstandard dialect; they may have a foreign language background; in New York City, often both are true.

But the effect of nonstandard dialect influence on writing is an extremely complex problem. For one thing, not all speech features interfere equally with correctness in writing. For example, the much-discussed feature of multiple negation appears rather infrequently in student writing. And for another thing, many errors that students make are <u>not</u> caused by speech interference. For example, there is simple ignorance of scribal conventions. To return for a moment to the sample paper, this student often fails to capitalize at the beginning of a sentence, capitalizes erratically elsewhere, doesn't punctuate a question with a question mark, and introduces a paragraph break between two closely related sentences. Furthermore, students have difficulties in mastering complex syntactic structures that are typical of writing, but seldom used in their speech, like adjective clauses beginning with <u>who</u>. And again, the complex system of

inflectional endings can give students difficulties that are not related at all to their speech patterns. Another factor is, no doubt, oversimplified teaching in the past, and the resulting confusion; sentences can begin with because.

Even with good teaching, though, there is the problem of hypercorrection; as students learn more about the grammar of standard written English, they are likely, as Shaughnessy has said, to "misapply" the rules they are learning. Consider this construction in the sample paper: the media make it seems. Here the student has misapplied the third-person agreement rule.

Finally, students' control of standard forms is intermittent: in one sentence they'll write incorrectly a form that they wrote correctly in the previous sentence. The most striking example in the sample paper is spelling. The student spells people correctly twice in paragraph 1, and then writes peope in line 5. Son of Sam alternates with Son of Same.

The point was that error can be explained; but it's obvious that much more research needs to be done. Still differentiating between different kinds of errors makes a world of difference in the way one approaches teaching: hypercorrect forms, for example, probably are an encouraging sign that learning is taking place.

We would argue that even students' non-speech-related errors can, in fact, be ultimately traced to language interference. Since so many rules of writing seem arbitrary and incomprehensible, demanding that students write forms that sound strange to their ears, then even relatively straightforward rules--like those for

capitalization--cannot be trusted. In a phenomenon akin to math anxiety, students develop a kind of writing anxiety, which leads to exasperating errors of the kind so often termed "careless." It seems that caring too much is sometimes the problem, without an adequate idea of how to direct that concern.

Since correctness for basic writing students is essentially mastery of an unfamiliar language system, teaching at the basic writing level has at least as much in common with English-as-a-Second-Language teaching as it does with teaching traditional composition. And yet basic writing students have far greater difficulties in learning the grapholect, or written dialect, than most students would have in learning a second language. Because their speech is perfectly efficient as a means of oral communication, basic writing students can't even perceive the grammatical differences between their speech and standard English. They've heard and read standard English all their lives, in school and on TV, but it would seem that a kind of simultaneous translation takes place. Basic writing students frequently aren't even sure whether they have put an -s ending on a word, let alone whether they should have.

Despite these problems, if error can be explained, it can be overcome. Most grammar instruction is based on cognition: students are drilled in analyzing sentences and must master a fairly complicated terminology. This is quite ineffective for second-dialect learning. Not only does study after study show that such activity has little effect on writing, but nontraditional students are likely to have relatively undeveloped

analytical skills. On the other hand, an inductive approach works well; in order to change ingrained language habits when they write (or to be more accurate, when they edit their writing for correctness), students need practice in using standard grammatical forms.

Materials to provide students with this practice must meet three criteria: (1) They must be based on students' actual writing; they should deal with students' most common and pervasive errors. (2) Materials must be based on careful analysis of these errors. For example, students' problems with word forms and syntax are interdependent. On the one hand, students must understand the functions and forms of basic word classes, like nouns and verbs, before they can understand, analyze, correct, or even use certain syntactic structures. Conversely, unless they understand syntactic structures, like adjective clauses, they cannot inflect the verb forms which occur in such structures. And sometimes (when one is attempting to count T-units, for example) even the distinction between word forms and syntax seems artificial. Is a group of words like people working in the city a sentence with a missing copula, or a noun modified by a participial phrase? or something else? (3) Materials for basic writing should be directed toward systematic, not occasional, features. Relatively unimportant errors like who for whom or omission or misuse of quotation marks should probably not even be mentioned until a later course.

At this point, we'd like to illustrate some of the principles we've been discussing, with some samples of the approximately 250

exercises we've developed for the course.

Above all, students need to work on forms in contexts that move them closer to actual writing than do exercises merely asking them to fill in blanks. Many of our exercises are adaptations of ESL techniques which ask students to manipulate forms in the context of sentences and paragraphs.

[Figure B] Figures B, C, D, E, and F removed due to copyright restrictions. Contact author on source of material. © Comp-Lab 1978.

This exercise gives students practice in writing sentences, changing verbs into the simple past tense and using them in a series.

[Figure C]

This exercise is a controlled composition, used in a unit on the verb BE. Students are asked to rewrite the entire paragraph, changing nouns and pronouns into the singular--which necessitates changes in past-tense forms of BE.

[Figure D]

This exercise is also a controlled composition. As in many of our exercises, base form verbs appear in capital letters, and students must change them appropriately as they rewrite the paragraph. Here, they are asked to rewrite the paragraph in the past tense, and to do this they must recognize finite verbs and change them into the correct past-tense forms; and in this particular exercise, they must also recognize the infinitive forms which do not change. Inflected verbs are thus contrasted with infinitives, which helps students to avoid hypercorrection of infinitives, like <u>if the wife failed to delivered</u>.

[Figure E]

This is another exercise employing the principle of contrast, used in a late unit on noun possessives. To help students avoid confusion with previous learning, they are asked to distinguish among many different -s endings: noun -s endings (marked with a circle), present-tense verb -s endings (marked with a square), possessive -'s endings (marked with a triangle), and contracted -'s endings (marked with a diamond).

[Figure F]

Finally, proofreading exercises like this one give students practice in editing for correctness. This is a cumulative exercise at the end of work on past-tense verb forms, which also requires students to recall work from four previous units. They must be able to identify correct forms in context, and to identify incorrect and hypercorrect forms that need to be changed. Exercises like this one give students practice in the kind of editing they must learn to apply to their own papers.

What may not be obvious from these samples is that the materials are autotutorial. This word has nothing to do with audiovisual (they are written exercises), but it means that the materials are self-teaching. They have been designed so that every exercise has unambiguous answers. It can be done and corrected by the student himself, without assistance from the teacher. This is important for a number of reasons, but most significant, by checking their own work students are getting the perceptual practice they need to edit their own writing, instead of relying on the teacher to point out their mistakes.

Here are a few broader implications of what we've been saying:

First, for nontraditional students, editing should be taught as a separate skill from composing. It follows that fair writing assessment examinations for these students must allow time for editing, if correctness is any part of the evaluation--and it always is.

Second, for these students, error in standard written English is not a matter of "mere surface features." The interdependence of word forms and syntax must be recognized if we are to deal with students' writing problems.

Finally, and most important, we believe that work on word-form correctness increases students' fluency and rhetorical development, as well. As students feel themselves gaining control over the medium of expression, they feel freer to express themselves, and most students prove to have worthwhile things to say. They stop using the avoidance tactics of oversimplified sentences and constructions that inadequately represent the complexity of their ideas. After a semester's intensive work on correctness, students show greatly improved attitudes toward writing.

These are some of the ways in which error in writing deserves the most serious intellectual attention--both for our greater understanding of the written language, and for the sake of the students we teach.

Figure A: A sample student paper written for English 100

I disagree that people are becoming increasingly violent. Because every person, or the majority of people are not all neurotic.

Some people are crazy and but that everyone. Violent crimes such as these the Son of Sam committed do not amount to the Hitler committed Jews population. Even the Boston Strangler killed more than Son of Sam. It is my belief that the media make it seems the violence is increasingly devastating. I would hate to think that every one around is criminal oriented. Even more so were the proof. We have police departments Army, Air Force and National guards. who can somehow provide help and protection.

Who can say or give an account of all those who were violently killed. Any of them who killed intimidated the offender. Or is it was there any justification for those crime committed. This is why I personly disagree.